

BOOKS AND AUTHORS—REVIEWS AND COMMENT

LITERARY CRITICISM AND BOOK NEWS

John Masfield's New Book—Recent Verse by American Singers—Mrs. Bianchi's Translations from the Russian.

A TRUE POET.

GOOD FRIDAY AND OTHER POEMS. By John Masfield. Boston, 1916. \$1.50 net. The Macmillan Company.

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth—
My sinful earth these rebel powers array—
Why dost thou pine within and suffer death,
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servants' loss,
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
Within be fed, without be rich no more!
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men;
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

This is the one sonnet which Mr. Masfield, in his little book on Shakespeare, chooses for quotation. It is, he says, "the noblest of the sonnets." We were struck with the judgment at the time—not because we disagreed, but because it was interesting that any one should have thought of looking for "the noblest" of the Shakespeare sonnets. For there are very few of them to which the word "noble" can be applied at all; and the usual person simply falls in love with those he finds most lovely ("From thee have I been absent in the spring," "Full many a glorious morning have I seen," and so on), and even in danger of passing by the apostrophe to the soul because it is not keyed up to expect nobility. It was a characteristic act of Masfield's that, though he would not admit that there are others more beautiful, he chose for the readers of his Shakespeare primer "the noblest of the sonnets."

We make this digression (if wandering from the path before one has struck it can be called a digression) because Masfield's critical flair for nobleness is strikingly in accord both with the spirit of his creative work in general and with that of the sonnet series in the present volume. To say that the sonnets are themselves, in the full sense of the word, noble would perhaps be going too far—there would be nothing left to say of the master sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth. Rather, they are the utterances of a soul enamored of nobility. That they are not in the same class with Milton's sonnets on his blindness, or with Shakespeare's sonnet quoted above is due neither to a paucity of beautiful lines, but to a certain lack of firmness in the intellectual substratum.

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Take, for example, the sonnet—
If Beauty be at all, if beyond sense,
There be a wisdom piercing into brains,
Why should the glory wait on impotence?
Biding its time till blood is in the veins?
There is no beauty, but, when thought is quick,
Out of the noisy sickroom of ourselves
Some fluttery comes to try to cheat the sick,
Some drowsy drug is groped for on the shelves.
And, for the rest, we play upon a scene
Beautiful with the blood of living things;
We move and speak and wonder and have been,
Upon the dust as dust, not queens and kings;
We know no beauty, nor does beauty care.

For us, this dust, that men make everywhere.
There is here more than a first-glance obscurity. Shakespeare's sonnet is obscure in the sense that it needs to be read more than once; but in the end every word tells, and the structure stands solid. In Masfield's the phrase "wait on impotence," for example, is not only a stumbling-block; it is a permanent blemish. One cannot say "wait on impotence" any more than one can say "wait on your displeasure" when one means "wait on your plan," and to put it so is sheer loss. This, however, is merely a small carelessness. A fault which is both fundamental and more typical lies in the vague nature of the metaphors there are no disparate beings or qualities, but (page 99)

We, who breathe the air,
Are God ourselves, and touch God everywhere.
Even so, however, even if one becomes reconciled to the use of "Beauty" in an all but all-inclusive sense, still one cannot feel that the most beautiful of the sonnets are those in which abstract Beauty has no place—among them the last one, with its lovely melancholy (philosophic, but simple), and this perfect crystallization of a happy fancy.

Is there a great green commonwealth of thought?
Which ranks the yearly pageant, and decides
How Summer's royal progress shall be wrought?
By secret stir which in each plant abides?
Does rocking daffodil consent that she,
The snowdrop of wet winters, shall be first?
Does spotted cowslip with the grass agree
To hold her pride before the rattle bare?
And in the hedge what quick agreement poe,
When hawthorn blossoms redder to decay,
That Summer's pride shall come, the Summer's rose,
Before the flower be on the bramble spray?
Or is it, as with us, unending strife,
And no consent a lucky gasp for life?

The play, "Good Friday," deals with the Crucifixion, or rather with the attitudes of various types of people toward it and the effect of the scene upon them. It is interesting, and has a fine simplicity and terseness of expression, but somehow or other fails to strike fire. It is less to be prized, we think, than the sonnets.

We would add in passing that if we have been critical of Masfield, we have been so in all reverence. He is the greatest of our living poets, and he challenges comparison with the great ones of the past. Nor would we wish (as might possibly be conjectured from our remarks) to confine him to

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ROLAND G. USHER.
("The Challenge of the Future," The Macmillan Company.)

the field of daffodils and lovers. On the contrary, his most notable achievement in our opinion, is "The Everlasting Mercy," and the finest of his lyrics—and it is, in truth, noble—is this (from the volume called "The Story of a Round House"):

In the dark womb where I began
My mother's life made me a man.
Through all the months of human birth
Her beauty fed my common earth.
I cannot see, nor breathe, nor stir,
But through the death of some of her.

If the grave's gates could be undone,
She would not know her little son,
I am so grown. If we should meet,
She would pass by me in the street,
Unless my soul's face let her see
My sense of what she did for me.

What have I done to keep in mind
My debt to her and womankind?
What woman's happier life repays
Her for those months of wretched days?
For all my mouthless body leeches
Ere birth's releasing hell was reached?

What have I done, or tried, or said
In thanks to that dear woman dead?
Men triumph over women still,
Men trample women's rights at will,
And man's lust roves the world untamed.

O grave, keep shut lest I be shamed.

RECENT VERSE

American Singers and a Bundle of Russian Lyrics.

THE WHITE MESSENGER AND OTHER POEMS. By John Masfield. Boston, 1916. \$1.50 net. The Macmillan Company.

THE CUP OF COMUS. By Madison Cawein. Boston, 1916. \$1.50 net. The Macmillan Company.

THE HIGHER KING. By Thomas Walsh. Boston, 1916. \$1.50 net. The Macmillan Company.

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JOHN MASFIELD.
("Good Friday and Other Poems," The Macmillan Company.)

made atonement by giving us three-quarters of a bookful of unsavory verse.

If Mr. Walsh's work is too intellectual and perhaps too subtle ever to be generally popular, its appeal is none the less sure to a small but flatteringly composed audience. He is a poet of poetic inspiration and dramatic possibilities; and, further, because the endowment of his mind is rich in the lore of the past, particularly the legends and customs of the Roman Catholic Church and the ancient glory of Spain, Catholicism is in Mr. Walsh at once a strength and a weakness.

It is a strength because there is no history like that of the Church for which he is so passionately fond. It is a weakness because ecclesiastical themes are necessarily passionless in a worldly sense, and Mr. Walsh lacks the power to recapture the monastic atmosphere frequently leads the poet into subjects and language that appeal only to the specialist. An example of this is to be found in the poem, "Epitaph of Coltrane," which only one versed in Scholastic philosophy can understand.

Mr. Walsh has a fine ear for music, and many of his songs sing themselves: I know that down arched square
And narrow street they still are there,
Dolores, Pilar, Mercedes,
Reclining in the balconies.

But his most remarkable gift is his power over words to make them do his will. Vitalized by his pen, one word frequently acquires the strength of ten. Sometimes he creates pictures of dim, adorned cathedrals, or of Gothic strongholds, high on crags, hoarding their ancient secrets through the years. Sometimes a few lines contain material for a whole drama. An example of this is the poem, "The White Messenger," which only one versed in Scholastic philosophy can understand.

That daub of rouge upon a leering hag
Is where you struck your queen; that
Of rogues and cripples wrongs your
Soul, whose king
You net, to mock her anguished, starved
lands,
An imbecile upon a bloated nag—
You struck her, Goya, yet they kissed
your hands.

"Russian Lyrics and Cossack Songs" is an interesting collection of poems, well worth republishing at the present day, and Mrs. Bianchi deserves well for her faithful and devoted rendering of them. For she has sacrificed the translator's legitimate glory of clever phraseology and poetic smoothness for the rather thankless labor of a conscientious reproduction of sense and rhythm. Her reward is that she does enable the reader to get, with almost undiminished force, the romantic melancholy hovering over this country of hostile elements, of frequent warfare and of an autonomy that holds human life as very cheap. Almost any poem in the book would illustrate the feeling. The following two stanzas will show it as well as any. The first is from Pushkin's "Goblins of the Steppes":

Stormy clouds delicious straying,
Showers of snowflakes whirling white,
And the pallid moonbeams waning—
Sad the heavens, and the night!

The second from Lermontoff's "Crucifixion":
Grievous times will surely befall thee,
Danger, slaughterous fire—
Thou shalt on a charger gallop,
Curbing at desire;
And a saddle girth all silken
Sully will sew,
Slumber now, my wide-eyed darling,
Lullaby, by-lone.

Generally the patriotism that runs through all the work is not so much a fondness for Russia, the nation, as a pride in her physical grandeur and magnificence. Lermontoff writes:
And yet I love it! Why I cannot say,
The endless snowy steppes so silent
brooding,
In the pine forests autumn winds pursuing—
The floods' high water on all sides of
May.

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AUCTION UP TO DATE

The Modern Bidding Game—Its Simplifications.

MODERN AUCTION BRIDGE. By H. P. Clark. Boston, 1916. New York: Weyl & Co.

REAL AUCTION BRIDGE. By H. P. Clark. Boston, 1916. New York: Weyl & Co.

MODERN AUCTION IN TEN LESSONS. By H. P. Clark. Boston, 1916. New York: Weyl & Co.

SELECTED POINTS OF AUCTION BRIDGE. By H. P. Clark. Boston, 1916. New York: Weyl & Co.

THE NEW RULES AND LAWS OF AUCTION BRIDGE. By H. P. Clark. Boston, 1916. New York: Weyl & Co.

Published by the author. New York, 123 Broadway.

It is a striking proof of the simplification which auction bridge has undergone in the last two years that Mr. Clark is able to compress his admirable little treatise into 100 small pages. In fact, the analysis of the modern bidding game covers only thirty-eight of them, the rest of the volume being taken up with a reprint of the 1915 playing laws of the New York Whist Club.

Auction stood in great need of simplification. The original low spade bids, with their complicated conventions, were an incubator of the game, because they were out of harmony with its true character. They have been quickly swept away in the course of its development. The nulls, introduced for a time, have been discarded for the same reason. Ordinary nulls and nulls with the dealer's hand exposed (nulls overt) have their place in the master game of whist, where they give a bidder with weak cards the opportunity of making a successful check against the "mauer" (the man who underbids good cards in order to trap overconfident opponents). Since whist is a game of manly complications and infinite variety, the nulls play into its theory. But since auction is in its nature a game of quick action within narrow limits, it has grown steadily away from the complications which were unfortunately foisted upon it at the beginning.

Presupposing a knowledge of the rules of whist, which in themselves are much simpler than the rules of old bridge whist—the theory of bidding can now be reduced to very elementary terms. A few directions for conveying rudimentary facts about the game, the partner while declarations are being made, are sufficient. Everything else depends on the experience, balance and judgment of the player. The soul of modern whist is in the bidding. The partner while declarations are being made, are sufficient. Everything else depends on the experience, balance and judgment of the player. The soul of modern whist is in the bidding.

Mr. Clark's little book recognizes this changed quality of the game—its approximation toward the philosophy of poker. It can therefore be commended as a thoroughly sound study of up-to-date auction.

In Mr. Metcalfe's treatise the principle of simplification is pushed to an extreme which will startle the most conservative school of expounders and players. The author is evidently a Westerner, and his theories suggest another clash of opinion between the East and the West. He wants to cast out bodily all "informative" bids of the sort which were formerly associated with the low spade openings. Both Mr. Clark and Miss (or is it Mrs.) Grace G. Montgomery, representing New York authorities, endorse conventional opening bids of one trick in clubs and diamonds, not with the idea of playing either of those minor suits, but of indicating to a partner that the bidder holds ace and king, or ace, queen and jack in the suit named. The partner may then change to a heart or a spade, or to no trumps, knowing what two high cards in the dealer's hand he may count on.